

Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee Annual Scrutiny of Natural Resources Wales 2020.

Update on briefing on key issues and progress made since February 2019.

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Covid-19
3. Green Recovery
4. Ongoing Business Continuity
5. Flooding
6. Brexit Readiness
7. SoNARR2
8. Senior Staffing Update

1. Introduction

- 1.1. I am looking forward to discussing our progress with the Committee in December. You will be aware that this is the session postponed from March 2020, to examine our performance for the year to March 2019, and I understand that the Committee will hold another session for 2019-20 once our Annual Report and Accounts are published.
- 1.2. I am therefore enclosing the briefing we originally submitted in February 2020, but this cover note mentions a few key changes which have taken place since then written:

2. Covid-19

- 2.1. The key issue since February's briefing has of course been Covid 19, as discussed during our meeting with the Committee in July. As a result, we have seen an even greater awareness of the importance of nature and green space, and a renewed emphasis on climate change and its impact on the environment. NRW has also been supporting the Welsh Government with work on the Green Recovery.

- 2.2. The Board and I remain very pleased with how well NRW coped with the initial pandemic, and our staff have stayed committed throughout. Our ICT stood up well to staff working from home, and most field-working teams are operational, where they can ensure they meet required safety guidelines.
- 2.3. There has obviously been an impact on our delivery, and on our partners, suppliers etc, although we have continued to deliver all our high priority services, for example, the incident response to the Llangennech derailment at the end of the summer.
- 2.4. However, we reviewed all our deliverables to reconsider what was possible and as a result the publication of our Business Plan for 2020-21 has been postponed. It will be publishing later this month, and we will send a copy to the Committee as soon as it is available. We have also examined the effect on our budgets and worked closely with Welsh Government to ensure we have sufficient funding to meet high priority areas.

3. Green Recovery

- 3.1 In some cases, we have added additional areas of work, the most significant of which is around the Green Recovery. As you will be aware from our letter to the Committee in June 2020, the Minister for Environment, Energy & Rural Affairs commissioned NRW's Chair, Sir David Henshaw to lead a taskforce to develop ideas that link climate action with job creation, inclusive and fair economic growth, and other development priorities.
- 3.2 The group has concentrated its efforts on delivering practical and prioritised action using the tools in Wales' legislation, and the expertise ingrained in its communities, to inform long-term proposals focussed on:
- Carbon emission and climate risk
 - Reversing the decline in biodiversity
 - Connecting people and nature through investments in green infrastructure
- 3.3 Sir David's expert group includes the Future Generations Commissioner, Sophie Howe, along with senior representatives from business, environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the farming and third sector and Local Government. The Group will report to the Minister at the end of November. Again, we will ensure that the Committee is given sight of the group's findings as soon as it is published.
- 3.4 To support people's connection with nature during the pandemic, through safe access to the land owned and managed by various non-government organisations, NRW also created a Strategic Allocated Funding Grant. NRW and Welsh Government each contributed £600,000 to a total of £1.2m in grants to help boost

the country's green recovery from the coronavirus pandemic. The money aims to ensure groups who manage and care for the environment are able to open and operate safely as coronavirus restrictions are lifted. These grants have now been awarded to the Woodland Trust, National Trust, Wildlife Trust, RSPB and Plantlife.

4. Ongoing Business Continuity

- 4.1. We are, of course, planning ahead to ensure that we remain able to deliver our priority work over the autumn/winter period, looking at a reasonable worst-case scenario and what we can plan and prepare for now to ease the pressure.
- 4.2. Some of our buildings have been reopened, and a robust system is in place to allow those staff who are unable to work from home effectively to use them. On occasion, buildings have been shut down temporarily due to suspected Covid cases, but the system allows us to close offices quickly, ensure all staff are notified, and arrange for deep cleaning if required. We will continue to review the use of our offices as guidance changes during the autumn and winter months, recognising that we may need to 'protect' some offices for incident response work.
- 4.3. A strategic exercise ("Exercise Trident") was undertaken on 2 September to test our preparedness for dealing with concurrent incidents (such as Covid, Brexit and flooding or other environmental incidents). This involved our strategic incident responders (our Executive Team and our Duty Strategic Managers) and allowed us to assess how we would manage multiple incidents with a reduced number of staff available. A number of elements were tested, including how we would prioritise our work and continue to protect people from harm and protect the environment, how we would move resource to focus on our priorities, how we would support our multi-agency partners, how we would manage our reputation and ensure good communications with the public, Welsh Government and other partners.
- 4.4. Work has now started in earnest to build a resilient, flexible and efficient low carbon organisation post Covid, building on NRW's organisational values and enabling our people and partners to deliver our Well-being Objectives. The renewal programme board met in September for the first time and continues to meet fortnightly.
- 4.5. We continue to be ever mindful of the pressures on staff and the mental health support that some people may require during these difficult times. This support is clearly communicated through our Wellness Action Plans and regular internal communications, and includes a variety of resources such as signposting to initiatives such as Welsh Government's Time to Talk, as well as guidance for managers on supporting staff who are lone and remote working. All staff have access to our Employee Assistance Programme which includes a 24 hour helpline, and we currently have approximately 90 qualified Mental Health First Aiders amongst our teams.

5. Flooding

- 5.1 As you will be aware from our session with the Committee due to take place on 12 November, we have [now published our reports into February's flooding](#). The four independently reviewed reports examine NRW's procedures and actions, including the performance of flood defences and the flood warning service within the context of the exceptional conditions earlier this year. They also looked at how the organisation manages the land in its care to understand if any land management operations undertaken by NRW prior to the flooding incidents contributed to impacts on communities.
- 5.2 The reviews found that the decisions and actions taken by NRW staff played a significant part in lessening what could have been even more severe impacts across Wales. The closing of flood gates, installation of demountable barriers and clearance of structures ensured many areas were effectively protected from the waters.
- 5.3 However, the sheer scale of the extreme weather meant that, at times, NRW's operations were stretched. This included the ability to react to rapidly escalating and unforeseen events on the ground, or to gather visual observations to support the issuing of flood warnings.
- 5.3 A record 243 Flood Alerts, 181 Flood Warnings and 6 Severe Flood Warnings were issued in February allowing people to take action to reduce the impact on themselves, their families and their properties. However, 12 flood warnings were not issued when they should have been, and six were issued late. Some immediate improvements have since been made to help reduce the eventuality of this happening again in an event of similar magnitude, and the review recommends longer term actions for further improvements. We look forward to discussing these reports and their recommendations with the Committee in November.

6. Brexit Readiness

- 6.1 We recently responded to the External Affairs and Additional Legislation Committee's consultation on Exiting the European Union: Preparedness in Wales for the end of the transition period.
- 6.2 In this response, we note that WG are working hard to provide certainty and develop mitigation for specific sectoral risks and they have previously stated that there will be no change to the level of environmental protection, nor to environmental standards in Wales. UK Government (UKG) has previously given a similar commitment. However, we are likely to see changes through WG and UK legislation over time. Any "regulatory divergence", for example resulting from trade deals struck with other countries, could impact on NRW's remit. Uncertainty regarding potential

governance changes including the Transfer of Functions (ToF) could have significant implications for NRW's role and remit.

- 6.3 Covid-19 has enabled some WG and NRW 'stress testing' of No Deal scenario mitigation. However, dealing with Covid-19 impacts has also affected WG and stakeholder preparedness and impacted on sectoral resilience. The concurrent impacts of Covid-19 as a 'multiplier effect', for example if a second wave combines with a No Trade Deal outcome, could exacerbate risks to planning preparedness and associated disruption.
- 6.4 Rapid and effective communication between UKG and WG are key to ensuring preparedness across the UK. Clear and timely communication between WG, sectoral stakeholders including NRW and the general public is required to signpost to relevant changes to processes. It will also be essential to highlight where there is continuity to maintain compliance, for example the continuing relevance of statutory habitat environmental protections and associated stakeholder responsibilities.
- 6.5 NRW is working closely with WG to prepare for EU Exit across a range of policy areas, coordinated through NRW's EU Change Programme. For example, NRW is working with the Energy, Planning and Rural Affairs (EPRA) division to develop updated EU Exit scenarios to continue to scope potential implications. Additionally, WG are continuing to liaise with NRW regarding future funding to support the longer-term implementation of continued protection for Natura 2000 sites and features post EU Exit.
- 6.6. Other preparations include:
- The recruitment of staff across operations and policy to fulfil a range of roles, increasing the capacity and building the resilience of functional teams.
 - Establishment of formal BREXIT programmes for no deal work and for policy and regulatory work, which provide updates to each NRW Board meeting;
 - Attendance at the Minister for the Environment, Energy and Rural Affairs' EU Transition roundtable meetings, and supporting the seven working groups;
 - Ensuring EU Exit is at the fore in our discussions at a strategic and policy level with Welsh Government, Environment Agency, Natural England, Forestry Commission, SEPA, SNH, and Irish EPA.

7. Development of SoNaRR2

- 7.1. Following the publication on NRW's website of the draft [State of Natural Resources Interim Report](#), in December 2019, we have been working with stakeholders to prepare the final SoNaRR 2020 report which will be published in December. In two phases the first in December this year which will include the summary report, the assessment against SMNR and the natural resource registers. Then in March 2021

when we publish the ecosystem theme and building block chapters. We will ensure that Committee members are sent details of the report when it is available.

8. Senior Staffing Update

- 8.1 I am delighted that the Executive Team is now at its full complement, with Rachael Cunningham, Executive Director of Finance and Corporate Services, and Sarah Jennings, Executive Director of Communications, Customer and Commercial, both having started in September. Our new Head of Customer Experience, Naomi Lawrence started in June 2020, and we have also recently appointed a permanent Head of Governance, Colette Fletcher.

9. Conclusion

- 9.1. Although Covid 19 has been extremely difficult for everyone, the Board and I have been very pleased with how NRW has responded. One positive outcome of the pandemic is that the importance of the protection and promotion of Wales' natural environment is increasingly being recognised, and we have been able to support the Welsh Government's agenda with our work on the Green Recovery, whilst maintaining our key services. Our commitment now is to harness this momentum as we emerge from the crisis, and work diligently with our partners and key stakeholders to ensure that a truly green recovery is embedded in our collective response.